

Tenacity wins respect for Senate 'curmudgeon'

BY JOHN O'CONNOR

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These are the words that can make the **Senate Finance Committee** squirm:

"The chair recognizes Senator Della."

What usually follows, after a brief pause to collect his thoughts, is George W. Della Jr.'s examination of all the costs, regulations, delays and hindrances that make life difficult for consumers and small businesses. For 20 years, Della, D-Baltimore, has focused on the details, but sometimes such nit-picking drives his co-workers to frustration.

"He asks questions that are thought-provoking, but at the same time he enjoys the process," said Sen. John C. Astle, D-Anne Arundel, the committee's vice chairman. "He likes to throw mud. It's the essence of what the

Senate's about. It's about the debate."

Astle should know. Last week, he was on the receiving end of Della's inquiry, as the **Senate** considered amendments to SB 160, a bill allowing state-chartered banks to charge customers for returning canceled checks.

The bill would save banks money for postage and other costs, but for Della the issue was about customer service.

"The banks charge us fees — these are our checks," he argued on the floor in favor of an amendment that Astle said would gut the bill.

When his amendment failed, Della proposed a second, less-ambitious amendment requiring banks to send a full-sized facsimile of canceled checks. That, too, failed, so Della proposed a third amendment that would de-



Sen. George W. Della Jr., shown here during a recent Senate Finance Committee hearing, can be prickly among his colleagues and lobbyists but is revered by his constituents.

lay implementation until next year — and brought groans from the body.

"I give," Astle joked, supporting the final amendment.

Most people do not receive canceled checks and would not

care if they did, but it's the type of issue that prompts passionate constituent phone calls and motivates the man that finance committee member Sen. Lisa A. Gladden good-naturedly calls a "cur-

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mudgeon."

"He's from an older era," said Gladden, D-Baltimore. "He used to be a court clerk and he's very particular about everything.

"I think he gives a humanistic presence. It's the voice that isn't always heard in the committee with so many business people."

Finance is the only Senate committee with two city members, and Gladden, a freshman senator moving from the **House of Delegates**, said she appreciated Della's knowledge of the system, despite rumors of his personality.

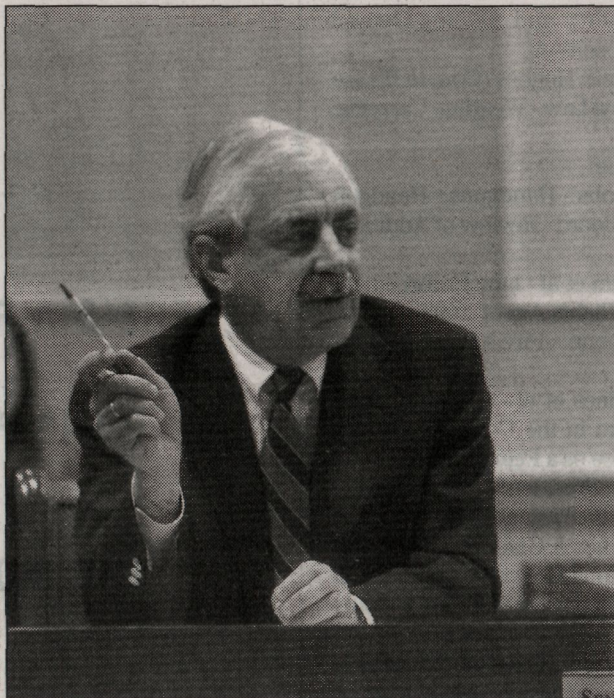
"I heard he was difficult. I find him charming, I guess," she said, pausing before adding "...In a challenged way."

The son of a former Senate president, Della served on the Baltimore City Council in the late '70s before moving to the Senate in 1983. Because he did not want to be "beholden," he has turned down leadership positions in favor of fighting his own battles.

"I never forget who brought me to the dance," Della said. "I know sometimes I irritate some of my colleagues. I know I irritate the cadre of lobbyists, but people usually know where I am. I don't hold anything back. Once I make a commitment ... I keep the course."

Despite his father's advice to become a lawyer, Della followed his father into politics. After his father quit the Senate and became a lobbyist, the two often found themselves on opposite sides of issues.

"There were some mighty cold, cold Sunday dinners," Della said. "I think I had a lot to do with him ending his lobbying."



ERIC STOCKLIN

Sen. George Della said of his reputation: 'I know sometimes I irritate some of my colleagues. I know I irritate the cadre of lobbyists, but people usually know where I am. I don't hold anything back. Once I make a commitment ... I keep the course.'

Della's district, now the 46th, historically included only South Baltimore, but has changed dramatically three times. In the early '90s, it was redrawn to include parts of Baltimore County, and last year was stretched through downtown Baltimore, along North Avenue and into the district of former Sen. Clarence Mitchell IV.

When the Court of Appeals blew up the governor's redistricting plan, the district expanded across the harbor to include Canton, Highlandtown and East Baltimore neighborhoods. Suddenly, Della was com-

peting with incumbent Sen. Perry Sfikas.

The two avoided a conflict when Sfikas decided to step out of the race, but the 46th is now one of the most diverse districts in the state, with large populations of labor, Hispanics, young professionals and blacks.

But throughout the upheaval, his commitment to Baltimore — and especially small businesses — had found strong support.

"That, in my mind, is the backbone," Della said of small business. "That's what kept those neighborhoods solid. They always know what's going on. They're a good sounding board."

When the state considered a bill to increase the minimum price of milk, Bucky Lynch II, owner of the Baltimore-area grocery store chain **Lucky's**, convinced Della the bill would hurt business because he sold milk as cheaply as possible to get customers in the door to buy higher profit items. Della frequently invokes Lynch's name during debate.

"I think he's one of the best you can have as a politician," said John Nichols, owner of **Steve's Lunch** in Federal Hill's Cross Street Market. "If I need advice, I ask him."

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., D-Prince George's/Calvert, called Della an "ombudsman for the little people," and finance committee Chairman Thomas M. Middleton, D-Charles, respects Della's positions, even if they are often in opposition to his own.

"I love him. He is unpredictable, and he is tenacious," Middleton said. "I like that."

And even sometime opponents, such as Astle, can respect his commitment.

"When the chips are down, George is in the fox-hole with you," Astle said. "But you've got to make a convincing argument."